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Jean Philippe Mathy, *Melancholy Politics: Loss, Mourning, and Memory in Late Modern France*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011. 248 pp. \$64.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 0271037830.

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Melancholy Politics is, by accident or intent, a work that evokes quite a number of memories. The author's focus is the post-1968 period, when the last great French narrative of revolutionary overthrow apparently collapsed, to be replaced by a fragmented political landscape populated by nationalist, reactionary, left, and postmodern interrogations into the nature of the French state. *Melancholy Politics* is, in many ways, a roadmap for the generations since, haunted by the past, and by pasts that never were. As Mathy notes, "Today's debates often resemble a shadow theater, the staging of a dubious battle where the living and grief-stricken confront the memories of the dead, from the paternal specters of Gambetta and Jaurès to the great Jacobin generals, de Gaulle and Bonaparte" (p. 41).

Memories are also for mid-career academics who think of Jean-Philippe Mathy as the erudite whose key works on American and French relations and representations such as *Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America* (Chicago, 1993) were part of required reading in graduate school some years ago, at a time when French intellectual history and philosophy still furtively dominated much of what was academic discourse. Subsequently, the orbit shifted away from the unchallenged eminence of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and other *maîtres penseurs* in favor of a more postcolonial array of talents from Edward Said and Homi Bhabha to Dipesh Chakrabarty, and perhaps, we should also mention, the cosmopolitanism of Slavoj Zizek.

In *Melancholy Politics*, Mathy has somewhat revived or at least reinvented French intellectual history, and he does so by avowedly not writing intellectual history. He is quick to point out that he is not interested in histories of critical ideas and chains of influences. This is either a modest or bold claim for a book that directly addresses the Dreyfus Affair, searches for affinities between Emile Zola and Pierre Bourdieu, glosses Foucault and the Foucauldians, covers extended arguments around the journal *Le Debat* under Pierre Nora, notes the rise and impact of the New Philosophers from Andre Glucksmann to Bernard Henri-Levy, and ponders the political and literary theories and cultural critiques of Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud, Regis Debray, Cornelius Castoriadas, and a host of others.

A careful reading, though, shows that Mathy can be taken at his word. His book is less a recounting of great schools and grand ideas, than a crafted meditation on the present: a sort of extended commentary on contemporary French politics. Though *Melancholy Politics* actually *is* intellectual history—almost all of the characters, citations, sources, arguments, and ink space are given to figures who think and talk and expound critique in public for a living—it is less about them, than it is about the France that has shaped the historical possibility of their debates.

While scholars over the last generations have claimed or declaimed on the value of "theory" (especially French) in multiple disciplines from literary and women's studies, to geography, American studies, philosophy, and political science, readers with an historical bent have been able to read Foucault or Bourdieu, et al., not as theoretical or philosophical *texts* from which to draw discursive frameworks, but as actors in particular political, social, and economic configurations. Mathy's work underscores this point. To know the history of France is not particularly to be taken up with theory, philosophy, or

intellectualism, but—much like his characters—to find those domains enmeshed in the rather prosaic stuff of everyday ulcers, tirades, and insecurities, often or always linked to strikes and trade unions, presidential races, the sociology of law and order in metropolitan centers, loss of national grandeur, and the general dislike of some French people for other French people.

In terms of subject matter, Mathy's approach has all of the engagement, logical structure, and reasoned, convincing argument that one might expect from a socio-political history focused on those who think for a living. The main characters suffer from a certain sense of self-absorption, often arguing familiar positions, debating within a circumscribed world. In the early going, the work can seem severely tendentious: 1968 is the postwar moment when all of the hopes, grievances, disillusion, and self-righteousness of the *soixante-huitards* come out in full force.

Patience, though, is rewarded as the narrative takes on larger global and political questions, especially the Algerian War, and ultimately, linked chapters dedicated to the coded arguments about identity, law, and culture posed by the headscarf controversy and rise of the National Front. In these latter chapters the whole colonial and postcolonial turn is given a serious thinking-through, not by exploring new frontiers in imperial studies, but more in the vein of Herman Lebovics' *Bringing the Empire Back Home*—looking to examples in the playing out of French politics itself.[1]

Mathy is masterful on the details and maintains a *litterateur's* sense of the pleasures of the text. He has an ear for the key phrase or mordant insight, commenting on what Emmanuel Mounier called the “established disorder” (p. 134) of French leftist politics, and has a talent for spinning phrases of his own, sketching out the imperious machinations of Charles de Gaulle and Pierre Mendes France “who had forseen that the new middle classes produced by postwar prosperity would gladly trade the old colonies for the stock market, and the flower oratorical culture of the old Republic for television” (p. 135).

The chapters proceed dialectically, matching affairs of critical and literary philosophy with political events and social transformations. An introduction overviews a by now substantial literature on memory and historical remembrance, particularly as articulated through the Freudian lenses of loss and mourning, thus establishing the “melancholic” register of Mathy's analysis of contemporary French political and philosophical discourse. The opening chapter addresses the “Specters of the Sixties” by remaining true to its title and not recounting a history, but reconstructing apparitions and haunted questions about 1968 that never seem to go away. This develops into a discussion of the “French Postmodern” shaped around the likes of Jean-Francois Lyotard, Zygmunt Baumann, and Emmanuel Todd and the plight of “modernist intellectuals, who found themselves with no prince to counsel” (p. 65). Karl Marx's admonition for philosophers to change the world is stood on its head by Bauman: “The *legislators* of old, who had a lofty conception of their world-historical role as professionals of the word, have given way to today's more modest, and self-deprecating, *interpreters*” (p. 52).

This melancholy register of diminished expectations is even more pointedly articulated in Mathy's reading of Pierre Nora's seminal forum, *Le Debat*. By launching the journal, Nora proposed to open up a new intellectual space, one neither Marxist nor reactionary, but multidisciplinary and multi-perspectival, proposing debate (“because there is none in France”) to contest an older generation's logic of authority and pronouncement. As Mathy explains, “[I]n Nora's view, the problem with the intelligentsia was that they didn't know, or didn't want to know, that they no longer existed” (p. 77).

Some intellectuals became consumer celebrity figures, impresarios of philosophy like Bernard Henri-Levy. Others resisted obsolescence by drawing on venerable, older models of the engaged French intellectual. Mathy's chapter “The Return of the Prophet” focuses on Pierre Bourdieu and his attempt to stand in the legacies of Emile Zola, embracing the ideal of the encompassing intellectual engaged with social and political critique in a manner more reminiscent of struggles over the rights of man than the systemic or academic philosophies of Jean Paul Sartre or Foucault.

The second half of the book resituates these individual interrogations into broader contexts. Notably, the later chapters, like the earlier, are still marked by narratives of longing, dissatisfaction, and appropriations of the past. The 1990s herald the coming of the “Memory Wars” and the proliferation of commemorative cultures. In a synoptic overview, Mathy examines the claims of actors and victims from the Holocaust and the French Resistance, as well as from Armenian parties and former colonial peoples pressing for redress on empire, slavery, and exploitation. All are groups previously ignored by the Republic and fitfully given space by their own claims and counterclaims. These matters overlap in “Uses of Marianne,” as both left and right ingeniously distort and fabricate rhetorical and linguistic acts to propagate ideologies and policies of inclusion and exclusion around the Republic. The strategic and tactical powers of discourse come together with particular salience in chapters devoted to “The Uses of the Republic,” “Old Wine, New Skins,” and “Race, Laïcité, Frenchness,” which parse out the Muslim headscarf controversy, the Jean Marie Le Pen challenge, and the adoption and distortion of political representation and language.

The rise of Le Pen’s National Front is framed by an increasing destabilization of the very definition of the French state itself, such that “the volume of references to the Republic was matched only by the inaccuracy and semantic vagueness in the uses of the word (which) sometimes meant national, sometimes democratic, sometimes simply French, referring in turn to constitutionally guaranteed individual rights, or the state of law, or even citizenship” (p. 130). The result, Mathy points out, is that “France” could no longer be invoked as synonymous with republican governments that had long appropriated the liberty, equality, and fraternity ideals of the French Revolution. Challenged by the extremist right wing, President Jacques Chirac in 2002 called on “all Frenchmen and women to come together...to affirm the unity of the Republic and restore the authority of the state.” Yet Mathy points out that this was no longer a sacred invocation, as “thirteen million individuals... refused to ‘Save the Republic,’ either by persisting in voting for the candidate of the National Front or by staying home” (p. 131).

Addressing this unity became a major challenge for intellectuals, linking together the twin braids of Mathy’s political and philosophical histories. The chapter “Memory Wars” is particularly fascinating in its accounts of thinkers like Max Gallo, enjoined to write and publish small volumes such as *The Republic Explained to my Daughter* or *The Love of France Explained to my Son*. These mass-audience reflections played out the French loss of national pride as a malaise, rather than a symptom of social and economic inequalities. Referring to unhappy (especially) North African heritage youth in France, Gallo’s “father” character remarks to his child: “If France is nothing but an empty home, of which those who live in it say she no longer represents anything, then why want to become French, and why remain so?” To this Mathy has an evident response: “The implication here is that black and Arab youths refuse to become French, when many of those who rioted in 2005 did so to demand their rights as French citizens” (p. 177).

Here, Mathy brings his analysis of France’s melancholy politics into its broadest contemporary context: not postmodernism, but postcolonialism, tying “France” to the world. The Muslim headscarf issue is exemplary of the issues at stake. Mathy underscores the controversy as indicative of a government ideological response to a school board issue. “Out of 639 students who came to class wearing a scarf, a bandana, or a Sikh turban, 538 decided to remove it after a few days,” he notes, indicating a degree of accommodation largely ignored by media and pundits. The reasons are fairly straightforward: “The veiled Muslim teenager performs...the same role as the ‘welfare queen’ of U.S. conservative ideology. In the eyes of its opponents, the Islamic scarf stands in for what is wrong with French society today. It has become the quilting point on which are concentrated the entire set of values and customs and institutions currently under attack” (p. 192).

At stake are republican principles and a state attempting to deal with the challenges of an increasingly multicultural, multifaith and postcolonial idea of a nation without colonies, running up against a

universal creed of respecting individual human rights. The attempt to legislate only for individuals requires the denial of differences that are historical rather than innate, and “race” becomes an issue because its actual effects must be ignored. Notes Mathy, “the color blindness imperative of the neo-republican creed has turned into an obsession with color, a heightened sensitivity to the racial nature of the image France projects on the international scene” (p. 205). As such, “as an ideological construct, neo-republicanism relies on a highly idealized and highly selective view of France’s past and present. It conveniently ignores the discriminatory practices that have plagued the last century” (p. 207).

Remaining close to his central argument about intellectuals, politics, and the melancholy, Mathy does not issue a call for new histories and philosophies, nor offer bold invocations of multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, or plans for France’s way forward. What he does offer is something familiar to readers of his work over the decades: a stringent commentary on French political culture that also has resonance across the Atlantic.

This makes perfect sense for a scholar whose work has long dealt directly with Franco-American cultural confrontations. Readers who followed the Mitterand and Chirac years, the collapse of the Socialists under Lionel Jospin, and the unwarranted surge of Jean-Marie Le Pen will find much to meditate on here, as Mathy deconstructs the way politics and race are constructed as terms of discrimination that cannot be named, and American comparisons are made with Affirmative Action and ghettoization. In fact, in a grand circle returning to Mathy’s earlier works, like *French Resistance: The French-American Culture Wars*, the American ghost haunts much of this work.[2] *Melancholy Politics* seems a fitting companion, along with *Extrême-Occident* and *French Resistance*, almost a third part of a trilogy of futures imagined, pasts longed for, and the inexorable dialectic of grand ideas and actors shaping the politics of the present.[3]

NOTES

[1] Herman Lebovics, *Bringing the Empire Back Home: France in the Global Age* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

[2] Jean Philippe Mathy, *French Resistance: The French-American Culture Wars* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

[3] Jean Philippe Mathy, *Extrême-Occident: French Resistance and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) and Mathy, *French Resistance*.

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